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ABSTRACT

Analyzing the life and work of members of religious groups presents predicaments not always encountered in other biographical endeavors. Some problems faced by religious biographers can be illustrated by looking at works analyzing the writings and life of Ellen White (1827-1915), a Seventh-Day Adventist pioneer and educator. For more than a century the Adventist membership, particularly in the United States and the Pacific, have been taught explicitly or implicitly that the central core of White's writings, which included a philosophy of education, were received through visions or dreams given by God. White was considered inerrant, and the question of her "sources" rarely arose. To safeguard their religious faith, some sectarian biographers fail to accept the notion that some of the tenets of their belief structure are problematic. Researchers, however, began to examine more closely White's educational writings to ascertain the sources of her educational philosophy which formed the basis of the Adventist education system. In the 1980s, following some serious historical research studies of White by Ronald Numbers and Walter Rea, White's credibility as an inspired source of religious history, education, health, eschatology, and devotional literature lay in tatters. The Adventist prophet's sources had been discovered and there was little room for the belief that they constituted visions of God, through His chosen Messenger, to His chosen people. Her views were merely part of her socio-religious and educational milieu. (Contains 36 notes.) (NKA)

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The school dog is not the school dog:

The dilemma of writing biographies

of religious educators.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Analysing the life and work of members of religious groups presents predicaments not always encountered in other biographical endeavours. Some of the problems faced by religious biographers can be illustrated by assessing the work of those authors who have analysed the writings and life of Ellen White (1827-1915), a Seventh-day Adventist pioneer and educator. For more than a century the Seventh-day Adventist membership, particularly in the U.S.A. and the Pacific, have been taught explicitly or implicitly that the central core of White's writings, which included a philosophy of education, were received through visions or dreams given by God.

II. SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST BELIEFS

The Seventh-day Adventists are a Christian sect that grew out of the Millerite movement of the 1830s. Seventh-day Adventists display a fundamentalist belief structure in their adherence to peculiar doctrines. Their belief in the seventh-day sabbath, tithing, the manifestation of the gift of prophecy in one of their early leaders, the non-immortality of the soul, the centrality of their organisation in eschatological events, their non-acceptance of plurality of belief, the hierarchical structure of their organisation and their triumphalism and isolationism is a collective manifestation of sectarianism.[1] Seventh-day Adventist's claim that Ellen White wrote under Divine inspiration and thus her writings are an authorative source of religious and educational teaching. The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists claim that:

> One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the

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[1] see Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, (1988), Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines, Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, and Certificate of Baptism, (c.1960), available from South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Wahroonga, N.S.W., Australia. This writer, in opposition to a number of Christian analysts, uses the term 'sect' rather than 'Church' to define Seventh-day Adventists. The term 'sect' is used to indicate a religious group adhering to distinctive doctrines see Walter Martin, (1992), The Kingdom of the Cults, Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, p.409; cf. Donald Roy, (1988), Reproduction, Resistance & Transformation at Maranatha High School, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, p. 3; and John Knight, (1973), Religious Belief and the establishment and maintenance of Seventh-day Adventist Tertiary Education, unpublished Bachelor of Education (Honours) dissertation, University of Queensland, pp. 10, 222.

abundantly clear that White, contrary to over a century of Adventist belief and teaching, was not doing historical research at all. It opened the can of worms even further.

The Spectrum debate was followed by a "first-class piece of historical scholarship" on the source of White's principles of healthful living by Ronald Numbers, an Assistant Professor of the history of medicine and science at the University of Wisconsin.[10] Numbers demonstrated that White derived her health reform ideas, a key element of the Adventist lifestyle, from contemporary health reformers. He reminded his readers that White had claimed to receive the principles of healthful living through visions from God.

During the 1970s, Walter Rea, a Seventh-day Adventist minister, intensified his research into the sources of White's best loved devotional and educational works.[11] Rea asserted that "an alarming proportion of her published work had been borrowed from nineteenth-century writers, . . ."[12] Later in the decade it was also suggested that White's unique eschatological views were merely a reflection of religious currents in nineteenth-century America.[13]

Others began from this time to more closely examine her educational writings to ascertain the sources of her educational philosophy which formed the basis of the supposed uniqueness of the Adventist education system. A school system which Adventists claim to be the largest Protestant education system in the world; a system comprising more than five and a half thousand educational institutions including eighty five colleges and universities.

By the 1980s White's credibility, as an inspired source of religious history, education, health, eschatology and devotional literature to the Seventh-day Adventist believer, lay in tatters. The Adventist prophet's sources had been discovered and there was little room for the belief that they constituted the visions of God, through His chosen messenger, to His chosen people. Her views were merely part of her socio-religious and educational milieu.

IV. REACTIONS TO ANALYSES OF WHITE'S WRITINGS

The reactions to these critical analyses of the sources of White's inspiration and revelations, give an insight into the quandary facing biographers of religious educators.

Unfortunately the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other fundamentalist Adventists who analysed the life and work of White during the 1970s, were reluctant to accept the veracity of the research. The officials of the Ellen G. White Estate, for example, criticised the findings of each scholar and put in place a programme of damage control.[14] These leaders

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10 McAdams, (1980), "Shifting Views", p.31; see Ronald L. Numbers, (1976), Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White, New York: Harper and Row.

11 for example, Ellen G. White, (1898), The Desire of Ages, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association; Ellen G. White, (1890), Patriarch and Prophets, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press; Ellen G. White (1900), Christ Object Lessons, Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association; and Ellen G. White, (1917), Prophets and Kings, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association; Ellen G. White, (1903), Education, Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association; Ellen G. White, (1913), Counsels to parents, teachers and students, Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association; and Ellen G. White, (1923), Fundamentals of Christian education, Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

12 McAdams, (1980), "Shifting Views", p.38; and Walter T. Rea, (1982), The White Lie, Turlock, California: M & R Publications.

13 Jonathan Butler, (1979), "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World", Spectrum, 10(2), 2-13.

14 for example, Bradley, (1971), "Ellen G. White and Her Writings"; Ellen G. White Estate, (1977), "Commentary on Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White, by Ronald L. Numbers; II: A Biased, Disappointing Book", Spectrum, 8(2), 4-13; Ellen G. White Estate, (1982), "The Truth About The White Lie", Ministry, (August Insert), pp. 1-16; and Olson, (1981), 101 Questions. For a brief history of the Ellen G. White Estate's response see McAdams, (1980), "Shifting Views", pp. 34-38, 41; cf., Douglas Hackleman, (1980), "G. C. Committee Studies Ellen White's Sources", Spectrum,

were not fully cognisant of the milieu of their own narrow sub-culture, in particular its socio-academic environment. A great gulf had arisen between supposedly 'radical' Adventist scholars and the orthodox, conservative leadership. Seventh-day Adventist scholars, in particular those who had been and were being educated in non-Adventist institutions, were able to comprehend the significance of the new findings and interpretations. Those who were not so educated or those who possessed an investment in retaining the traditional teaching that White was the 'Servant of the Lord', were unable to comprehend or admit to the significance of the results of the current scholarship.[15]

In spite of the fact that throughout the history of Seventh-day Adventism the membership had clearly 'caught', if they were not implicitly 'taught', that White was inerrant and the question of her sources rarely, if ever, arose; the hierarchy officially informed the membership that the church had always known she used sources. The leadership reluctantly admitted that the extent to which she did so, was surprising.[16] The membership was also informed that White was not a plagiarist. It was argued that few nineteenth century writers used quotation marks to acknowledge their sources, so why should White do so? The membership was reminded that Biblical writers borrowed from others without acknowledgment. Inherent in this official stance was an element of retrospective theology; wherein dogmatic theological stances are explained to have been misunderstood by the laity when these established beliefs are latter shown to be in error.[17]

In an attempt to safeguard their religious faith some sectarian biographers unwittingly, or in some cases possibly intentionally, fail to accept the notion that some of the tenets of their belief structure are problematic. Others, while recognising the existence of an idiosyncratic belief or tradition, fail to compensate sufficiently for the influence of the belief structure of their community on their own psycho-social outlook. Consequently their subject evaluation lacks critical distance. Analysts must ascertain the sectarian biographer's awareness of the problematic nature of some of the beliefs of the sub-culture and account for the extent to which the biography includes disturbing data.

Arthur L. White, secretary of the White Estate, in his six volume biography of, or rather 'monument' to, his grandmother, reluctantly accommodates a measure of the new data.[18] However, in spite of his concessions, the work suffers from White being unaware of the academic milieu of his own religious group. White claims a major objective of his biography is:

> to select and present, in detail, significant events, two or three in a given year, that best illustrate her [Ellen G. White] prophetic mission, depicting the interplay between the prophet and church leaders, institutions, and individuals, and recounting the sending of testimonies and the response to these messages.[19]

10(4), 9-15.

15 see John Knight, (1977), B. A.s, M. A.s, and M. U. G.s: The world not turned upside down- A case study in sociocultural change, unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Queensland; and Knight, (1973), Religious Belief and the establishment and maintenance of Seventh-day Adventist Tertiary Education.

16 Neal Wilson, (1980), "This I Believe About Ellen G. White", Adventist Review, (March 20), pp. 8-10.

17 for a recent example see Arthur N. Patrick, (1991), "Does Our Past Embarrass Us?" Ministry, 64(4), 8.

18 Arthur L. White, (1981-1985), Ellen G. White: Volumes 1-6, Washington, D. C. (and Hagerstown, M. D.): Review and Herald Publishing Association.

19 White, (1981-1985), Ellen G. White: Volume 6, p.10.

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White not only believes in a prophetess who speaks to a select minority of religionists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century but he continues to believe in the 'myth' in the light of current research by scholars within his own community.

In spite of its hagiographic tendency White's work is of higher biographical value than Noorbergen's work Ellen G. White: Prophet of Destiny.[20] Noorbergen, a non-Adventist writer does not account for the findings of Adventist researchers, rather he highlights the Adventist mythology surrounding White without apology. Noorbergen is either out of touch with the Adventist academic community or he was aware of an appreciative Adventist market who would bolster the sale of a poorly researched volume, or both. Noorbergen's book is hagiography.

An example of the entrenchment of historical misinterpretation within Seventh-day Adventism, is to be found in the significance of an Ellen White dream of a furrow on the property purchased for the site of the future Adventist Avondale College at Cooranbong in New South Wales. It is believed that White's relating of the dream to those involved in assessing the property aided in their decision to purchase the land. Two dissertations by Australian Adventists, Lindsay and Hook, discuss the significance of the dream to the founding of White's model school.[21] Lindsay's explanation lacks careful historical analysis. He believes the furrow vision was critical in the decision to purchase the site for her model school.

Hook on the other hand, stays close to the primary historical sources. He leaves the reader with three possibilities; the furrow story was a figment of White's imagination, the dream was symbolic, or only White saw the dream and the furrow. Hook believes it played only a minor role in the decision to purchase the school site.

The work of Lindsay and A. L. White do not give sufficient weight to historical conditions in assessing White's charisma and her contribution to Adventism. The handling of the furrow dream by Lindsay and A. L. White supports the view that the biographers of sect and denominational leaders, have often allowed themselves "to portray the subject in such heroic proportions that the historic conditions appear to possess only superficial relevance and play no real role in controlling or conditioning the person."[22]

V. DILEMMA FOR BIOGRAPHERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

One of the elementary difficulties facing writers of religious biography is the comprehension of the mind-set of the subject. While it may be difficult for a non-religious biographer to appreciate the religious dimension of a subject, the task for a non-believer to fully comprehend a peculiar religious psyche and/or educational philosophy can be well-nigh impossible. In order to capture the unconventional milieu of certain religious groups, particularly fundamentalist and sectarian groups, it is helpful for the biographer to have the insights of an insider. For example, while Adventist jargon such as 'truth of the message' can be quickly learnt, the underlying psychological and educational implication of the phrase is only fully comprehended and experienced by those who '<u>know</u> the truth of the message'. In this respect insiders have the advantage of an extra dimension as biographers of religious educators.

Religious biographers who are insiders are confronted, however, with other unique task predicaments. To critically investigate their subjects, religious biographers must endeavour to stand above their own mind-set. An oscillating dilemma is thereby set in motion. The researcher is continually being forced to choose between the roles of appreciative insider and

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[20] Rene Noorbergen, (1972), Ellen G. White: Prophet of Destiny, New Canaan, Conn.: Keats Publishing, Inc.

[21] A. G. Lindsay, (1978), The Influence of Ellen White upon the Development of the Seventh-day Adventist School System in Australia, 1881-1900, unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, pp. 58-59, 75; and Milton Raymond Hook, (1978), The Avondale School and Adventist Educational goals, 1884-1900, unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, Andrews University, Michigan, pp. 2, 272-6, 292-8, 313-322.

[22] Ernest R. Sandeen (1977), "The State of a Church's Soul", Spectrum, 8(2), 16.

critical outsider. In time this oscillation can produce a personal spiritual crisis. A member of a religious organisation may have the advantage of insights available only to insiders but the religious biographer and "believer can find it difficult to inhabit the same skin in tranquillity and harmony."[23] The researcher may unearth disturbing data concerning their organisation, their religious beliefs and their educational philosophy and practices and find it impossible or intolerable to return to their previous personal religious and educational standpoint. The changing viewpoint and disquieting data may permanently damage the researcher's personal belief structure and complete loss of faith may result and be reflected in their analyses.

However, this dilemma has the potential to produce poignant and perceptive insights. For as Sandeen so astutely observes:

> When the historian and the believer are the same person, the writing of a book can become an enterprise fraught with tensions and, occasionally, agony. One must be an obtuse reader, indeed, not to see this tension and even feel this agony . . .[24]

Unlike A. L. White, Noorbergen and Lindsay, other Adventist writers have been able to discern, to a lesser or greater degree, the influence of the Adventist sub-culture upon their own thinking. They have been able to discern the effect on their belief structure of the consequences of the revelation of the misinterpretations of the writings of White. The shock of the exposure tends to be reflected in their subsequent treatment of Adventism and White.

Walter Rea, after a decade of research on the sources of White's devotional and educational books, produced a vitriolic attack on White and the White Estate in particular, provokingly titled The White Lie.[25] Unfortunately his bitterness tends to spill over to include all religionists. His book received scathing criticism from the staff of the White Estate.[26] Rea saw too clearly the large gulf fixed between current Adventist scholarship on White and the organisation's theological stance on White's religious and educational writings. He attempted to dialogue with the Adventist leadership but when attempts were made to lessen the significance of his research he began a campaign of disclosure to the laity.

Robert Brinsmead, a long time critic of mainstream Adventism in his book Judged by the Gospel spent five chapters on 'Whitolatry'.[27] His iconoclasm is less vitriolic than Rea. Brinsmead attacks the concept of White's uniqueness, yet he praises her contribution in the field of christology. Brinsmead the long time Adventist fringe dweller and critic is less severe than Rea, the previous Adventist minister of good and regular standing. The unfortunate effect of Rea's exposure on his own world view is transparently evident in The White Lie. Rea had spent most of his life teaching the Adventist message and in particular the divine origin and relevance to the end-time of White's religious and educational teaching. Rea by his disclosure had a great deal to lose, his career, his standing within his sub-culture and his friends, with no gain whatsoever. His analysis of White reveals his hurt and anger.

Lowell Tarling's Taylor's Troubles, a disguised account of school life at the Strathfield Seventh-day Adventist Senior High School during the 1960s, is also iconoclastic.[28] Taylor's Troubles can be interpreted as a thinly disguised criticism of Adventist education and its

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23 Sandeen (1977), "The State of a Church's Soul."

24 Sandeen (1977), "The State of a Church's Soul."

25 Rea, (1982), The White Lie.

26 Ellen G. White Estate, (1982), "The Truth about the White Lie", Ministry, (August), pp. 1-16.

27 Robert D. Brinsmead, (1980), Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism, Fallbrook, California: Verdict Publications, p. 124.

28 Lowell Tarling, (1982), Taylor's Troubles, Ringwood: Penguin Books.

educational philosophy. A philosophy of education based on the teachings of White as spelt out in such writings as Education, Fundamentals of Christian education and Counsels to parents, teachers and students.[29] Tarling ridicules the belief of Seventh-day Adventists that Adventist education possesses superior benefits than other systems for the educator and those being educated.

The humour of Tarling's semi-autobiography indicates that he does not believe that an Adventist education is of any special significance to prepare young Adventists for the Kingdom of God or to be witnesses to society of the 'truth'. He depicts life at Strathfield during the 1960s as typical of the life of the average school boy in any 'normal' Australian school of the era. Cheating, canings, fights, humorous sporting incidents, visits to the headmaster's office, girlfriends and hero worship are all part of Tommy Taylor's troubles. The humour reveals his disillusionment with Adventism education in particular and Adventism in general.

The work of Rea, Tarling and Brinsmead illustrate that the conflict between belief and scepticism is at the very heart of the dilemma of equilibrium in the work of biographers of religious educators. Van Harvey argued that "it almost seems like a historiographical law that the best scholarship is produced by the sceptical believer."[30]

In 1983, Graybill, the first doctoral student to have immediate and unlimited access to Ellen White's personal and unpublished papers, produced "The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century."[31] In spite of its lack of depth and a final overview, it illustrates a remarkable ability by a religious writer to balance disturbing historical data by being cognisant of both the Adventist academic environment and the social milieu outside Adventism. Unfortunately his missions "of rescuing Ellen White from burning buildings by tossing her from tenth story windows" did not save him from dismissal as associate secretary at the White Estate.[32] He was fired for the unauthorised use of sensitive manuscripts and "the wrong impression of . . . White created by the dissertation."[33]

Both Graybill and Numbers exhibit a deep concern for the history of White. It is apparent on every page. Numbers discovered aspects of White's teachings and attitudes that appeared to shock him. Yet he also possessed the courage and balance to clearly state the results of his research. But where Numbers and Graybill were successful, others failed. In short, A. L. White, Noorbergen and Lindsay fail to account for exposed 'fable' in their work. Their work is hagiographic. Rea, Brinsmead and Tarling to varying degrees, display a lack of critical distance; their writings indicate an inability on their part to handle the shock of the exposure of problematic myth. Graybill and Numbers, in spite of being as iconoclastic as Rea, Brinsmead or Tarling, have managed to produce an element of tension between the shock, surprise and sometimes agony which faces religious biographers as they expose the 'myths' of their own belief system.

In the light of the recent research, a number of Adventist writers have attempted to compensate for Adventist folklore in their writings. They have not been successful because they continue to

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29 White, (1903), Education; White, (1913), Counsels to parents; and White, (1923), Fundamentals of Christian education.

30 Van Harvey quoted in Sandeen, (1977), "The State of a Church's Soul", p.16.

31 Ronald Graybill, (1983), The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

32 "The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century: A review of Ronald D. Graybill's Doctoral Dissertation", (1983), Adventist Currents, (October), pp. 28, 35.

33 Douglas Hackleman, (1984), "The Greening of Graybill", Adventist Currents, (February), p. 28.

operate within the confines of their sect. Their writings thereby remain as reminders of social mismatches. For example, McMahon in his biography Ellet Joseph Waggoner: The Myth and the Man, discusses the misinterpretations by Adventist historians of this early Adventist theologian but fails to analyse the 'myths' of Waggoner from the stance of a non-participant.[34] Similarly, Graybill's Mission to Black America, Vande Vere's Wisdom Seekers, Knight's Myths in Adventism, Weber's Adventist Hot Potatoes and Donald Roy in his doctoral thesis Reproduction, Resistance & Transformation at Maranatha High School all address controversial aspects of Adventist history, belief, education or lifestyle but they do not gain the perspective of a critical sceptic.[35] They remain sympathetic, if somewhat critical believers, without the distance that can be obtained from other cultural paradigms.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

When interpreting the biographies of religious educators it is imperative to ascertain the stance of the writer on three interlocking aspects. First, the writer's relationship to the group under review must be determined. Being a member of the subject's sub-culture can help the writer to appreciate the effect of the belief structure on the thought patterns of the subject. The insider has a clear interpretative advantage over the outsider.

Secondly, it is vital, to discover the writer's awareness of the peculiar 'myths' of the group. Some religious biographers are unfortunately unaware of the follies of their own sub-culture. But even those who are aware of the 'myths' of the sub-culture often fail to fully re-evaluate their analysis in the light of the exposure of those myths as problematical.

Thirdly, of those writers who do accept such re-evaluations many often lack sufficient distance and thus over-react to the undermining of their cherished views. It has been claimed that if one lives in many tribes one is not fooled by the errors of one's own. But if one is first fooled by the errors of one's own tribe, it can be traumatic to expose that foolishness and to move among other tribes.

In short, mind-set and problematic myth must be accounted for in religious biography for this sub-section of writing to be taken seriously. The failure to account for such phenomena is the single most significant reason why the history of some sects and their educators have never been written, yet books on their histories and biographies of religious educators abound.

VII. CONCLUSION

An element of humour is probably necessary to ease the pain for serious biographers of religious educators. Most fail to perceive the humorous peculiarities of their own sub-culture. Humour is rarely used by Seventh-day Adventist writers. Tarling resorted to humour in his semi-autobiographical children's story of his school days. He has also unwittingly issued a warning in his 'Author's Note' to all who write and analyse religious biography. Tarling cautions:

> ...John Piles is not John Pye
> and Mr. Cooper is not John Cox.
> Leon Collett is not Mr. Carlsberg,
> Carlyle Heffron is not Carlyle Needham,

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[34] David P. McMahon, (1979), Ellet Joseph Waggoner: The Myth and the Man, Fallbrook, California: Verdict Publications.

[35] Ronald D. Graybill, (1971), Mission to Black America, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Company; Emmett K. Vande Vere, (1972), The Wisdom Seekers, Nashville: Southern Publishing Company; George R. Knight, (1985), Myths in Adventism: An Interpretive Study of Ellen White, Education, and Related Issues, Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association; Martin Weber, (1991), Adventist Hot Potatoes, Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association; and Roy, (1988), Reproduction, Resistance & Transformation.

Clayton Smith is not Clayton Sims
and the school dog is not the school dog.[36]

Not all biographers of religious educators gains critical impartiality. Unfortunately even the ubiquitous school dog is often not the school dog in religious biography for the 'myths' upon which the biography is based have not always been fully accounted for by the writer.

36 Tarling, (1982), Taylor's Troubles, p. viii.